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ON THE DUTIES OF A LIBRARIAN

The well-known New Zealand silly season is rapidly approaching us—that season, the first fortnight or so of December, in which ancient and respectable and broken-down persons ascend the platforms of the country, and deliver to the suffering pupils of our schools break-up speeches, duly reported in the press at what I have always felt to be undue length—speeches about the value of school life, and the great privilege of being young, and playing hard and working hard and being heroic and how to avoid juvenile delinquency, and Be good sweet maid and let who will be clever and all that. And sometimes, over the last year or two, as I have cut the hedge or brushed my teeth, or stopped and just gazed into vacancy I have wondered: What would I, if I became old and respectable and broken-down enough to be asked to deliver a break-up speech, say to all the youth and ardour before me?—The melancholy hour has

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now struck. The tycoons of the library world have taken counsel together. They have said, Beaglehole is old, sufficiently decayed, more or less respectable, and he has plenty of time, we'll make him do it. The usual mixture of vanity and sense of duty has made me say, after a decent interval of reluctance, All right. And you, and the tycoons, and a Minister of the Crown, are accordingly at my mercy.

What then do I say? If you were a boys' school (for a girls' school is quite out of the question), I could say: Boys, I have never admired your school much, but I suppose it is as good as most schools. Your masters are an average lot. I hope to God these are not the best days of your life. My advice to you is to be highly sceptical of anything a schoolmaster tells you. Accept nothing, in fact, for which he cannot offer reasonable proof. Ignore, as far as possible, the traditions of the spot in which your lot is cast. Make intellectual nuisances of yourselves. Be cynical and disrespectful and work out your own salvation.

It is no use telling these things to you. You are long past school. You are mature, adult, lost souls. You have been attentive and respectful to your lecturers. You have had a hard time, you have scorned delights and lived laborious days; for a whole year you have not been to the pictures or entered the doors of a coffee-bar. In the matter of books you have become erudite and discriminatory. You can tell a dictionary apart from the modern novel, though both may contain words indecent and new to you. You know the history of printing, and what all those cabbalistic signs on a card in a card catalogue mean. You know why it is vital to mis-spell the titles of books, without capital letters. You know how to "process" books, and disfigure them accordingly. Some of you may have reached that very high point of technique when you can find for one reader that book carefully misplaced on the shelves by another reader to keep it for himself. Some of you may even be dreaming of post-graduate work on the automation of libraries so that books can be wrongly classified, and rashly lent, without the intervention of the human mind at all. I will not say that you have parted with some of your humanity, and become librarians. But you are chock-full of library science. You have your rewards. In a short time you will receive your diplomas, and depart to the ill-paid jobs that are waiting for all of you; and more immediately, you will hear a lecture from me. It is awfully nice to receive diplomas, though not to listen to lectures, and so I do the right thing by you and, before I forget, extend—I think that is the right, the respectable word—extend my congratulations.

I proceed to my lecture. It takes the form of advice: On the Duties of a Librarian. Your first duty is not to be modest. You may if you like be personally modest, dress demurely, wear flat-heeled shoes, exclude from your repertory bow-ties and other flashy articles,

think meanly of yourself in the hierarchy of God's creatures; but as a librarian be aware that modesty is death. Remember that in this stupid, vicious, irresponsible, insane world, liable to burst into flames and smithereens and mortal agony at any moment, there is still such a thing as civilisation. There is music, there is art, there is poetry, there is learning, there is reason, there is the imaginative and probing mind of man. We cannot any longer say that the mind of man is immortal; we cannot believe with Bernard Shaw that "Euripides and Aristophanes, Shakespeare and Molière, Goethe and Ibsen remain fixed in their everlasting seats"; because they and their everlasting seats and we together may disappear at the touch of some fool's finger. But we must not be entirely pessimistic; we must believe that there are counters to viciousness and irresponsibility, that we can put up the sane against the insane with some hope of success, even if sheer stupidity is pretty hard to do anything about. We must believe, that is, in civilisation. And you librarians, who are the guardians of civilisation, have no right to be modest about it. In the face of stupidity, even pretentious stupidity, and all the other wrong things, you have no right to pipe down. Your job is to pipe up. I know, of course, that there are two aspects of civilisation: it is creative, and it is conservative—or rather it conserves. I don't know which is the more important. You can conserve without going dead in the head. You cannot create without a tradition, even if you only use the tradition as something to revolt from. All right, the librarian conserves—if you fancy better a different word, pre-serves —tradition and therefore civilisation. He is the trustee for Euripides and Aristophanes, Shakespeare and Molière, Goethe and Ibsen, as well as for Sir Isaac Newton and Einstein, and the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Statistics of New Zealand;* and he must be proud of it. He must be prepared to stand up not merely to abstract qualities he may dislike, but to people; he must—*you* must—be strong and demanding in the face of politicians and local bodies, mayors and chairmen of library committees, secretaries and accountants and heads of Departments. You have at hand the breastplate of righteous-ness, and if you lose the shield of integrity it is your own fault. You have the artillery of your processing techniques, and the banner of your diploma. And you need not worry: librarians are in terribly short supply; if you are sacked vou can always get a job somewhere else.

I am not suggesting, of course, that you should go round bullying people, even politicians or local bodies. As the guardians of civilisa-tion, you must yourselves be civilised. I am not suggesting that you should always be standing on your rights, even if as a librarian you have a lively sense of what your rights are. I do not want you to be merely tedious, preposterously pedantic; or always jockeying for position in the race for favour. If you must jockey for position—and it is very advisable to do this sometimes—do it so that no one sees

you. If you must be pedantic, do it to some purpose. Be tedious if you can win an essential point by it, but be careful not to be tedious the next time. Be massive, but also be good-humoured. You see I have fallen into advising you on the administrative side of your lives. I think perhaps you had better avoid flippancy, and irony; unless you are quite sure you are talking to a soul-mate. I have learnt from experience that these things will tend to put important people against you. You must be careful with bishops and mayors and chairmen of library committees and your local M.P.s. Ordinary M.P.s do not matter so much. What I am saying is, in brief, that it is your duty as librarians—that is, as guardians of civilisation—to be not only brave but subtle and conciliatory; you must have the roar and the nobility of the lion, but also the wisdom of the serpent, the ingratiating softness of the dove. In your profession, your duty is to turn these off and on at will, with a careful calculation that becomes an instinct. You must not, of course, give the impression that you are a calculating person. You must somehow combine all your qualities into a warm-hearted outgoingness. You must, if I may throw in another metaphor that does not match some of my previous ones, be a rock of integrity but not a stone of stumbling. Be a noble, wise, ingratiating and warm-hearted rock.

There is another thing for you to do in this matter of civilisation. Your primary job, of course, is with books, and heaven knows books are difficult enough to deal with. There are far too many of them. It ill becomes me to complain, I know, who am responsible for some of the largest and heaviest books ever placed on the New Zealand market; but at least I can plead that they are so expensive that very few libraries can afford to buy them, so that therefore very few librarians can ever have the trouble of lifting them on to and off their shelves. But there are so many books, not counting mine, that the librarian has enough to do, in all conscience, in collecting them, and cataloguing them and lending them, and getting them back, quite apart from wanting to deal with anything else. But you must be prepared, even if you do not want, to deal with something else. I speak now as a historian, whose job is to understand civilisation as it has developed. I speak as a consumer, demanding goods which the librarian should be able to supply. I demand books. That is legitimate. Is it legitimate for me to demand also from the librarian the other indispensable pabulum of the historian, manuscripts, unpublished records, historical records? Should the librarian get mixed up in this business? I know what the official library line is on this, and in the past I have rather differed from it. I have been rather a purist. The librarian's job is one thing, I have felt, and the archivist's is another; just as the archivist's job is one thing, and the historian's another. There are different techniques, different trainings. I should hate to see in New Zealand one big organisation, rejoicing in the name national, trying to grab everything, printed and unprinted, the

historian's primary material and his secondary material (to use, rather inaccurately, the historian's own jargon), and manage it all. I hope no librarian will ever arise who nourishes this unseemly ideal. But in New Zealand there are so few of us that everybody has to take on two or three extra jobs that he has not time for, and do them to the best of his ability, or they will not be done at all. So my purism will not do. We may be desperately short of trained librarians in this country; we are even more desperately short of trained archivists. Not that that has mattered to us New Zealanders very much in the past, because we have quite cheerfully flung our archives, the records of our national existence, the material of our national autobiography, to the rats and the floods and the flames. It is not an agreeable thought to the historian that it is now quite impossible to write the history of New Zealand, but that is coldly and literally true. As each fire takes place I have a certain physical sickness. Now it is certainly not your job as librarians to look after national archives. It is your job, on the other hand, as you scatter through the country (whichever country you belong to), to look after what you can get hold of in the way of local records, business records, family records. It is also your job, of course, to get hold of fireproof buildings in which to keep these things. You need not regard yourselves as permanent owners. You must regard yourselves at least as temporary trustees. (It is odd, and significant, how that word "trustees" keeps turning up.) You must add to your other endowments, your lion-like and serpent-like qualities, the eye of the hawk, the nose of the police-dog. The chief enemies of history, I have sometimes thought, have been rats, fire, and female relations. They have all had an animus against paper. You must be prepared to circumvent them all. Perhaps I should add governments going out of office; but you are not likely to come up against them. If you are a country librarian, your duty is clear. You must accumulate every scrap of paper bearing on the history of the country and of your own district that you can. Some of it will be rubbish. But when in doubt, preserve. Unborn generations of historians will rise up and bless you, even if your names are buried in the dust. A civilized society is a society that knows its own history. You will have contributed to the material for the history of your own society. You will have done so much for civilisation.

I have one more duty for you. As librarians, at least in New Zealand, you will be caught up in the ramifications of the National Library Service. You have got to do something about that. I do not say that the National Library is the concern only of librarians. It is the concern of all of us. I am not such a fool as to think that a library is a building, and not books. But I ask myself, and I ask you, and I ask the world at large, what claim a country has on civilisation, what claim it has to the veriest elements of economic good sense, when it keeps its national library under the sordid, depressing, and degrading conditions under which we keep ours. The National Library Service

management has been very good to me. They let me use their microfilm reader, and that has made all the difference to my professional life. I have occasionally to consult odd sorts of dictionaries, and I am given, to use the conventional phrase, every facility. But I never enter those ramshackle houses in Sydney Street without foreboding, nor issue forth from them without thanksgiving. I sometimes have visions of earthquake and collapse, of feverish digging, and a sad procession of bearers with the crushed unrecognizable bleeding bodies of librarians, some my friends—some, perhaps, students of the Library School—one, perhaps, even Me. I have memories of that fire that nearly did for the Union Catalogue. I think of the sheer value, in pounds, shillings and pence, of reference books. I think of the jammed mass on the shelves. I think of the working conditions, which would provoke riot and bloodshed in any chain-store in the country. And I think that national librarians are very brave and devoted men and women indeed. But this sort of barbarous existence, for books or for men and women, simply will not do.

Well, what can *you* do? The efficiency of the libraries of all of you will be bound up in some way with the efficiency of the National Library; and it can not be properly efficient if it is not decently housed. I say decently housed. It does not need to dwell in a marble and gold palace. But the universities, even if decades late, are getting new library buildings, with room for a few years' expansion, without marble and gold. Does a National Library deserve anything less? Your plain, your bounden duty, is to get on to the back of some politician, preferably a prime minister or a minister, but anyhow a politician, and refuse to get off; and when he expostulates, in a tone of injured innocence, to cling on all the tighter. Add to your other qualities the tenacity of the limpet. It is the only way. You will be quite disinterested. Your voice, sounding in his ears morning, noon and night, re-echoing through his difficult hours of sleep, will be the voice of civilisation. He may be converted, but do not leave him alone: there are others whom he must convert. In the end you will succeed, if you are not too old when you start. And then, like Nelson, you can feel you have done your duty.

I cannot think of anything else to say.